

Drone warfare in *Good Kill*

And a roundtable interview with writer-director Andrew Niccol and actor Ethan Hawke

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Good Kill opens in theaters in the US on May 15 and will also be available from video on demand. This comment and interview originally appeared September 26, 2014 as part of the coverage of the Toronto film festival.

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Written and directed by Andrew Niccol

Drone strikes carried out by the US military and CIA have killed thousands of civilians in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and other countries. The barbaric strikes, which have increased sharply under the Obama administration, are illegal under international and US law and amount to war crimes.

According to Reprieve, the British human rights organization, “To date, the United States has used drones to execute without trial some 4,700 people in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia—all countries against whom it has not declared war. The US’ drones programme is a covert war being carried out by the CIA.”

An April 2014 article in *Rolling Stone* observed, “The people of Yemen can hear destruction before it arrives. In cities, towns and villages across this country, which hangs off the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, the air buzzes with the sound of American drones flying overhead. The sound is a constant and terrible reminder... Over half of Yemen’s 24.8 million citizens—militants and civilians alike—are impacted every day.”

New Zealand-born writer-director Andrew Niccol has taken on the subject of drone warfare, with mixed but often intriguing results, in *Good Kill*, featuring Ethan Hawke, Bruce Greenwood, Zoë Kravitz and January Jones.

Major Thomas Egan (Hawke) is a former fighter pilot and Iraq war veteran, now operating drones over Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere from a trailer on a US Air Force base near Las Vegas. After killing people by remote control 12 hours a day he returns to his house and family in the tidy, slightly unreal suburbs. “Now I’m going home to barbecue,” he explains sardonically after one murderous shift.

His superior, Lt. Col. Jack Johns (Greenwood), is resigned to the endless conflict: “Don’t ask me if it’s a just war. It’s just war.” Two of the four-member team parrot, in an especially vulgar fashion, the US government line, something to the effect that “the ‘terrorists’ hate us because of our freedom and our way of life.” The fourth member, Airman Vera Suarez (Kravitz), is different. She comes to see through a good many of the lies.

The film is set in 2010 and centers on the stepping up of drone strikes by the Obama administration and the transfer of control of the attacks to the CIA, represented by a disembodied voice (Peter Coyote) from “Langley [Virginia].”

The atrocities accumulate. The crew, aiming for a bomb factory, kills two children. “Keep compartmentalizing,” Egan is told. But “I pulled the trigger,” he responds. The CIA, once it takes over, begins ordering

“signature strikes,” i.e., bombings based on what US officials believe to be suspicious behavior or simply on the association of the intended victims at some point or another with alleged “terrorists.”

When a strike goes wrong, the CIA official blandly tells the crew, as the US government repeats to the public, “No one regrets the loss of innocent lives more than us.” After one deadly bombing, he orders a “follow-up,” the notorious “double tap,” in other words, a strike on those responding to the first attack. “In our opinion, it’s proportionate.” He explains, “preemptive self-defense is ordered by the administration.” The voice and the commands it gives are coldly monstrous.

Following this attack, Suarez leans over and asks, “Was that a war crime, sir?” She suggests “that’s what terrorists do,” and points out bitterly that this is apparently what “they now give Nobel Peace prizes” for.

In a later scene, the CIA orders the bombing of a group of men near a market. Johns asks incredulously, “You want us to kill a crowd?” The men, he is informed, represent “an imminent threat.”

There is a good deal of this, quite powerful material. As the film’s publicity suggests, Egan starts “to question the mission. Is he creating more terrorists than he’s killing? Is he fighting a war without end?” It becomes increasingly difficult for him to carry on, both at work and at home.

In perhaps *Good Kill*’s most moving sequence, out in the backyard at home, Egan asks his wife, Molly (Jones), “You want to know about my job?” He proceeds to describe how he and his crew blew up a house, although the supposed Taliban official was not there. “I watched as neighbors started carrying bodies,” then we “blew up the funeral.” A tear runs down her cheek and she puts her head on his shoulder.

There are weaker sides to the film too. A subplot about Egan’s desire to return to flying actual warplanes is not especially compelling. The crisis in the Egan’s marriage that develops, while no doubt—or perhaps precisely because it is—based on the real-life accounts of military personnel, has something a little formulaic and predictable about it.

Most significantly, the recurring presence of a Taliban-rapist character is an obvious concession to the official propaganda campaign. Opposition to the horrendous war crimes committed by US imperialism is not predicated on support for Islamic fundamentalism or any of the regimes the American government sets out to bring down. Dealing with these reactionary elements is the responsibility of the Afghan, Pakistani or Yemeni people; it cannot be subcontracted to the US government, military and CIA, which have, in many cases, incited and funded such movements or regimes.

Writer-director Niccol’s invention of this Taliban “bad guy” in *Good Kill* forms part of the rationale for arguing, as he did in the round table interview included below, that US drone warfare has certain “beneficial aspects.”

Nonetheless, it's to his great credit that Niccol (the writer of *The Truman Show* and writer-director of *Gattaca*, *Slm0 ne* and *In Time*) undertook this project, in the face of considerable odds. This is the first major US feature film that has attempted to represent this criminal policy and its consequences both for the targeted populations and for the American people, even if the filmmakers (also see below) are not inclined to work out the full implications of their own effort.

A conversation with Andrew Niccol and Ethan Hawke

I participated, along with a number of other journalists, in a roundtable interview in Toronto September 9 with Andrew Niccol and Ethan Hawke. The following is a slightly edited version of that conversation:

Journalist 1: Was it [*Good Kill*] hard to get made?

Andrew Niccol: Yes. It's hard to make a military movie without the support of the military. So it means that all of the machinery you have to come up with yourself. I had drone consultants who I would speak to, and I was very lucky to get those ex-drone pilots.

Journalist 1: So did you approach the US military, and they presumably said, 'No, thanks'?

AN: They just said no. They were polite, but they politely declined.

Journalist 2: In the film, there are "signature strikes."

AN: This is well documented. I didn't make up the language, that's the language of the CIA. To go, as the character says, from a "personality strike" to a "signature strike." All that means is, if you're standing next to a terrorist, you're most likely a terrorist, so you're fair game. That's your signature.

Journalist 3: There is a parallel between his [Egan's] home and his work. Was there an attempt to show how detached we are from the consequences?

AN: This is the new reality for our pilots, our soldiers. They have this schizophrenic life. We've never asked soldiers to do this before in the history of warfare, to go to war from nine to five, and then go home. You have no decompression time, you're going to get up the next day and do the same thing again. So what that does to a pilot's psyche is unimaginable to me.

Journalist 1: Did you talk to drone pilots who had done what Ethan portrays in the film?

AN: Yes.

Journalist 1: And what sort of effects did they say it had on them?

AN: There's an interesting aspect to it. I spoke to one sensor operator [who works in tandem with the pilots] who definitely has PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], and admits it.

There are others who almost feel ashamed admitting that they're affected by it. They claim that they can compartmentalize. There are younger drone pilots who would use a joystick, perform their mission over Afghanistan, they're obviously not in Afghanistan, which is another point, then they go back to their apartments in Las Vegas and play video games at night. How do you possibly separate the two? I couldn't do it. Then you're really desensitizing yourself to war.

Ethan Hawke: What's interesting to me is that this film is about something real. Perhaps the next movie Andrew and I will do together will be a video game. That's where it's going.

I'm always very interested in where movies are going, where they will be 30 years from now. And where warfare will be. Will all major countries have drones? Will Obama be scared to walk out of his house? Where is this game going?

No one is talking about these issues. I think it's a very good moment when Zoe [Kravitz] says, 'So, they're handing out [Nobel] peace prizes

for this now?' A very good moment.

David Walsh: I think it's important you've raised these issues. The scene where the CIA official says, 'These operations never happened,' that's an acknowledgement that these are criminal activities, that these are illegal activities.

AN: It's not necessarily that. The military will say that it's 'national security.'

DW: They say that, but your film, whether or not you've worked out all its implications, is saying these are or may be criminal activities.

AN: It's well documented that the US has struck funerals intentionally. For me, that's a step over the line. Of course, they justify it by saying, 'Who goes to a terrorist's funeral except other terrorists?' For me, that's beyond. Also, to strike first responders, something the IRA used to do, that Hamas does, is beyond the pale for me. That's too much.

I try to tread a straight line, because there are also beneficial aspects to the drone program. The fact that they are so precise, we're not carpet-bombing people any more. If we get the right address, and hit a legitimate target, I understand that.

If you look at ISIS, for instance. There's probably nobody sitting here that would say that the guy who beheads somebody, if you get the right guy...would you not order a drone strike on him?

DW: But who created ISIS? Who incited Islamic fundamentalism for 50 years, going back to the Muslim Brotherhood?

AN: Right. That's the other thing that really interests me; Afghanistan is the US' longest war, 13 years. Vietnam was 10. The Iraq war was eight.

DW: Now there's a new Iraq war.

AN: Exactly, there's a new one coming. When are we going to decide that we shouldn't be in that part of the planet? Or are we ever going to decide that? Is this going to be an endless war? It's a very complicated question and I don't have the answer, but at least we will discuss it, which I think is important. To know what's being done in your name is important.

EH: With the so-called "war on terror" you really get into Orwellian territory, because who's defining what freedom is and freedom for whom? The people there certainly don't feel free.

I have a brother who's in the military, and my mother was in the Peace Corps and she works in Bucharest fighting racism against gypsies, trying to get kids in school. One of the things she often talks about is that if you just took all that money, and you just taught all the kids over there, you'd end terrorism so much sooner than by bombing them. That's the kind of peacenik dialog that a lot of people don't want to hear.

AN: When you speak of the "war on terror," we are terrorizing to achieve those aims. In Waziristan [in northwestern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan], people won't gather together in groups, even for town hall meetings, because it could be perceived that they're plotting against Western interests.

So when Ethan's character talks about people being afraid of blue skies because that's when the drones fly, it's true. People don't want to step outside, they don't want to rescue people from a strike... They don't show up, because they're afraid they're going to be hit again.

DW: That raises the question, is it about "terrorism," or is it about terrorizing an entire population?

AN: Right.

EH: Or holding an entire population guilty for what a few have done, which is oftentimes what people there do to us as well.

AN: Every time you kill one terrorist, if you give birth to ten more, it's surely counterproductive.

DW: Can I ask, is it difficult to make critically minded films? Is there something emerging, or is it just as difficult as ever?

AN: Oh, it's probably more difficult. Ethan and I were just discussing *Gattaca* [1997 science fiction film, written and directed by Niccol and starring Hawke], we couldn't get that made today at a studio. No way.

EH: No way. You couldn't even begin to try. It wouldn't matter who was involved in it.

Journalist 1: Why is it so difficult?

AN: It's so much easier to make money, big money, by making comic books.

EH: It started with *Jaws* [1975]. Much has been written about this. They've learned how to inundate and saturate... It's funny, these *Transformer* movies make a ton of money, and I've never met anyone who liked one. There's a case to be made about the power of advertising, and the power they have to create this sense that this is what we're supposed to see.

There's an essay by [Czech writer Milan] Kundera, in which he says during his lifetime he witnessed the birth of an art form and then he saw it eaten by big business. He makes a joke that what qualifies for an art film today is far inferior to what qualified as an art film in 1960.

In 1960, they were pressing the boundaries of realism and storytelling; it was a thrilling art form. Whereas literature has found avenues for this. The film industry hasn't found a place... I'm a dramatic actor so I've almost been feeling run out of the business over the last ten years because there are action movies and there are thrillers. Most studios don't make dramas any more. They'll make a drama if they think it might win an Academy Award, if you have [Steven] Spielberg directing it or something.

DW: And yet when I go to the movies, I don't find a lot of satisfaction in the audience itself.

EH: I don't either. They all leave the movie unhappy. You don't feel good after. I have to try to do enough things that make money so that if Andrew wants to hire me for this he can. If Andrew could get the guy who was in the last Marvel [comic] movie in it, he would get more money.

Journalist 1: Have you been offered one of those?

EH: I've been doing this since I was thirteen. They've offered things here and there. When I was younger, I was incredibly cocky and I thought those offers would always come. If you don't make people money, they don't like you.

Projects like this are worth trying. There's so much pull toward mediocrity your whole life. Everybody just wants you to follow the rules and cash out. It's worth it to try. We showed the movie at Venice [the film festival] and it was way more work than anybody wanted it to be, but this is the movie Andrew wanted to make and it exists, and it's hard to get people to want to talk about serious subjects. It's a lot of work.

There's a great pull...if Andrew would just use his imaginative mind to have it be, instead of a drone pilot, [someone] who could fly himself and have super-powers... My point being that I feel very blessed and grateful, and I believe at this moment in my life, I believe again, that it's worth trying. Sometimes the world beats you down, and you feel like nothing could ever work.

Journalist 2: I don't know if all the drone pilots are in Nevada. Could you tell me something about Las Vegas?

AN: There's a very practical reason why the military put a military base near Las Vegas. The reason they do it is because the mountains near Vegas look very much like Afghanistan. And that's how they can train. Also, when you are driving to Vegas from Los Angeles, they actually use your car just for fun, in practice, just to follow it. You can't see the drone, but they can see you.



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